



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## **The Holy Family – Year A**

### ***Honour your father and your mother***

*Readings: Ecclesiasticus 3: 2-6, 12-14, Ps 127, Colossians 3: 12-21, Matthew 2: 13-15, 19-23*

*‘Whoever respects his father is atoning for his sins. He who honours his mother is like someone amassing a fortune.’*

One of the curious silences of English History is the reign of Edward III. If I set a quiz I bet the majority would own up to almost total ignorance. Strange because he reigned for fifty years and some of the most momentous events occurred on his watch. Europe lost a third of its population to the Black Death. His claim to the French crown instigated the Hundred Years War. The great triumphs of Crecy and Poitiers and the bloodthirsty triumphs of his son, the Black Prince, are tattooed on the psyche of the English warrior class.

Unhappily for Edward his latter years saw the great designs unravel, the French connection reduced from half a nation to a few coastal pockets. His governance was manipulated by rising power blocks and, his heirs all dead, he was succeeded by his grandson, the vain and disastrous child, Richard II. This all came in the wake of the great warrior king being reduced to a cipher by the onset of dementia.

I thought back to this huge and ultimately tragic reign because of this morning's O.T. reading. The writer of Ecclesiasticus spells out for us the obligations of the faithful in respect of one of the Commandments. It is the commandment to *'honour your father and your mother'*. It is unique among the commandments in that it has a promise attached to it – *'that your days may be long in the land your God gives you.'*

It underscores the centrality of family life to the survival of a civilisation. It is for this reason that it is chosen by the Church to accompany the Feast of the Holy Family – along with St. Paul's further thoughts on the relation of husband and wife and obligation to their children.

Within the Faith there is a clarion call for a mutuality of respect and love. It is in sharp contrast to the cultural milieu in which we live where eldership has too often abdicated responsibility and the fragmentation of family has become the hallmark of cultural and civic breakdown and the undermining of virtue.

But Ecclesiasticus takes us into a very particular area of family life, one that increasingly impinges on our ageing demograph. *'My son support your father in his old age. Do not grieve him. Even if his mind should fail, show him sympathy. Do not despise him in your health. Kindness to a father shall not be forgotten.'*

We are a society now haunted by dementia. I have spent forty years visiting old people's homes and watched the cost. One of our parents lived with us for eight years with dementia. I watched a much loved mother gradually lose every bearing of the self and her recognition of even her nearest and dearest fade day by day.

I have recently been diagnosed with a condition that will, in all likelihood, lead to 'cognitive function impairment' sooner or later. I hear people's struggles to nurse and care for the afflicted in this strange and alien territory.

Our memory defines who we are. It is our identity. It is the key to our relations one with another. It is why we are who we are and why we love. So for man to be exiled, in the Biblical phrase, *'to the land where all things are forgotten'* is a waking nightmare.

The word dementia comes from the same root as the Italian word 'dimenticare' – to forget. To forget who we are is a tragedy beyond words and we do our best to care for those who are struck down, increasingly alone in a place with neither landmarks nor history.

But if this is the personal tragedy that afflicts thousands, there is a greater tragedy at work in our land and in our time. We have lived to see an age where our history as a civilisation is not remembered. Our days pass in a time where the Faith has been forgotten, not least, all too often, by those who were charged with its handing on. We inhabit a culture where the deep virtues have become a target of mockery. We are subjected to an ethic which redefines family life as the lowest common denominator of conjugal relations and a bewildering variety of domestic arrangements. We live in a society of idolaters and materialists (and we are not exempt). We look in the mirror and worship the reflection.

Our nation and our continent are suffering from corporate dementia.

I was born in the aftermath of the triumph over the great evil of National Socialism. I have lived to see the defeat of the other socialistic scourge – Soviet communism. Those great victories over godless materialism have, year by year, been given away. We have now killed more of our own children than Stalin or Hitler ever did.

We have forgotten our origins in the Judeo-Christian revelation.

We have forgotten our purpose in the divine life.

We can no longer remember the end of the journey on which we set out.

When the last Dark Age overtook Europe with the fall of the Roman Empire, it was the Church alone who carried the torch of sacred memory. It was the Church alone who refused to allow the truth to be forgotten. It was the little, beaten, persecuted band of faithful who brought the barbarians to kneel before the Cross of Christ.

We must care kindly for the demented but we must never forget what reality looks like nor conspire with madness to redefine it as sanity.

Our true remembrance begins and ends in the mystery of the Mass, the witness of the Holy Family and the Apostolic journey to the Heavenly City. Only the Church can help Man reclaim his memory of both his dignity and his destiny. We are the Church. This is our sacred calling.